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The Third Day

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Abstract

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The Third Day

by *Barbara Buchwald*

CHARLIE ARISTOTLE walked, as he always did in the late afternoon, down the dark, dirty stairs off the street to The Pour House. He could already hear the low wailing of a flute when he reached the door. Once inside, he felt the crunch of peanut shells under his thongs. Charlie sat down at a table which was covered with carvings and written thoughts. No one came to join him or even looked his way, although his appearance was an exact copy of theirs. He wore a ragged pair of pants and a sweatshirt that had no sleeves. His heavy, blond beard was carefully unkempt and the ends of his hair were just long enough now to twist into a tiny bullfighter's pigtail.

Charlie took a stubby pencil from his pocket and wrote on the table: "Somewhere it all must make sense, and all this ink and all this blood are for something. Somewhere is a place where all the DNA ends synapse and there is no anaphase." Then he closed his eyes and listened only to the mourning flute. It wandered, like Charlie, above and then below, but it never stayed on one note. In one long arpeggio, it changed from melancholy to excitement and ended in a high scream that was shattered by a bongo roll.

Charlie opened his eyes and there, in a place cleared of peanut shells (the stage), was Flavio La Morticella (the

king). Flavio leaned his great, soft, decaying body against a table. His eyes were half-closed, almost disappearing into his yellow-white cheeks. The cheeks, in their turn, disappeared into a thick, dark mat of hair. In one bloated hand, he had a sheet of greasy paper and he held it high above his head as he began:

“Below the steaming ocean They swim
 Carrying lights before faces that
 Have no eyes — the twelve Fishes and
 Each of the big ones eat the smaller.
 Where are the lilies?
 Spewing forth in mushroom clouds of sand and sea,
 the lilies lie beneath the
 Ragged crown of snow, beneath the bitter waters. . .”

Young bearded men with heavy eyes murmured to one another, and girls in black leotards snapped their fingers and nodded their heads in rhythm. Their long hair fell ecstatically to their shoulders. Charlie looked from face to face and saw in them nothing that he hadn't seen a thousand times before.

It was then that he noticed one girl sitting alone. The simple black sweater and flowing red skirt that she wore accented her gauntness and yet her womanly grace. Her short brown braids made her seem, to Charlie, a child of about eleven, but he knew she was not. She was crying, and her long fingers traced over the grooves in the table while her bare feet rested silently on the peanut shells.

Charlie Aristotle stood up, all at once, and went over to her. He had known her forever and would never know her. He sat down beside her and she closed her hands together over something and said to him and to no one, “None of my poems can express the longing, empty mourning. And so no one will ever know it as I felt it. No one will feel the pain in the hands and in the heart and in the feet.” She wept within herself and saw through eyes made ragged with grief. Charlie tried to look on with understanding. He framed her with his great, sad eyes and he stopped looking about the room.

With one hand, she swept her stringy hair away from her eyes. “I came to the city, I had nowhere else to go. Some-

where, I can't just remember the place, I had my child. No one knew even then, but we were all we needed and he shone like a candle in my darkness. Every day I washed him and every night I sang him to sleep beside me, his fat baby hands curled around my finger, quiet after a long day of reaching out." Her eyes followed the long bones of her feet.

"But now my child is dead. There's no use lighting the fire or heating the water." She saw, as one just awakened, the nakedness of her fingers. "It's strange. The air smelled spicy on that day, like apples drying in the sun. I held him in my arms and felt his body turning cold. I can feel the splinters in my hands still . . . 'for though I give my body to be burned and have not love. . .'"

The flute mourned and grieved and Flavio's rubbery lips gave life to the sounds he had created.

"Sleep, sweet homo,

Through the waking hours before the dawn,

In your polyethylene womb.

Go and lay your cedar boughs upon the mound of

Darwin's mocking laughter. . ."

They swayed like shadows before a flame and nodded and threw their peanut shells upon the floor.

The girl clenched her fists over her eyes, but her words were lifeless as before. "Three days ago we buried him, and since that time I have gone everywhere and done everything to keep from going there. What is there to be afraid of in a little child's grave? Even the hunger and the agony of seeing the soft earth turn hard shouldn't be enough to keep me from putting flowers in the grass beside it. Why must I be afraid now, after all?"

"In all man's life, there is nothing to prepare him for this. Come, I'll take you there." Charlie reached out to this girl he felt he had known so long, and they walked across the peanut shells that were The Pour House floor.

In the very early evening crickets rubbed their legs together and made the sounds that their grandfathers had made before them. Two swans swam for the last time around a small pond and somewhere the lilies were beginning to bloom.

They said nothing and only listened to the night sounds,

while she wept to herself. Once she stumbled and was faint.

"Let's go back," Charlie pleaded. "You should rest now and we can come tomorrow. It will all be the same tomorrow."

"No, I haven't even begun to come before. If I go back now I'll forget him like all the others. Someone has to remember and accept." But she leaned against him as they walked.

Two young boys in leather jackets passed them and they jeered, "Look at the lovers. She's really in great shape!" And their coarse laughter cut into the evening.

But the night sounds — the cars, the bells, the wind — carried even this away. In the end, when they neared the great iron gate, he was almost carrying her. She stiffened against his side and stood shaking in the wind as he left her to open the black gate. They walked a little way on the winding, gravel path that cut into her bleeding feet. At the bottom of a hill she stopped.

"I can go alone now. It's just a little way."

"It's no trouble. We've come this far, let me go the rest of the way."

She smiled gently for the first time. "I've never been so afraid as now, but it's a funny thing about Man. He can have help and advice, strengthening him and preparing him, but because he is Man he has to do the last himself. Go back to the poems and I'll come back, too." And she took Charlie's hand and put into it the small thing which she had always had. He felt its warm, metal contours. He had not enough faith for this, but she was already disappearing around the hill.

If Charlie Aristotle heard a rumbling in the earth, and a rolling away of stones, he didn't know it from his own heart. For a moment he started to follow her but he felt again the smooth, warm thing. All around him the lilies were a flowering, trumpeting blaze and somewhere there were bells ringing. Charlie went back to the gate.

Only then did he stop to look at that dim thing. In his hand, against his own flesh, he held a darkened nail.